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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the influences of gender, school year, and socioeconomic status on assertiveness for black students attending four predominantly white, southeastern universities. The study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data on assertiveness were collected from 560 black freshmen and juniors with the "College Self Expression Scale." The qualitative aspect of the study employed semi-structured personal telephone survey interviews with 21 key black student informants and attempted to identify unique beliefs, attitudes, and campus experiences associated with assertiveness. Analysis found that traditional gender related assertiveness differences tended to be associated with on-campus social behaviors whereas non-traditional gender differences tended to be associated with on-campus academic behaviors. This may help explain why respondents who rated themselves as assertive in quantitative surveys, later claimed to be passive or even submissive in the qualitative research. In addition, passive freshmen appeared to be intimidated by the unfamiliarity of their new campus environment, and believed that they would become more assertive in the future. Passive juniors appeared to fear the possibility of not graduating and expressed no belief in their future assertiveness. The socioeconomic backgrounds of the students did not influence their academic assertive behaviors but did influence their campus social assertiveness with high SES students more likely to express anger or aggression. (Contains 23 references.) (JB)

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THE INFLUENCES OF GENDER, SCHOOL YEAR, AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS ON ASSERTIVENESS FOR BLACKS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE UNIVERSITIES

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Problem Statement

A better understanding of the ability of some minority students at predominantly White post-secondary institutions to effectively adapt to the academic demands of their campus climates is essential to the success of policies designed to enhance learning for the increasingly diverse student populations within college and university communities. Fleming (1984) stated that "Between 60 and 75 percent of black students are currently enrolled in predominantly white institutions" and yet Black colleges produce "70 percent of the degrees earned among blacks because of the attrition rates at white colleges", (p. 10). While the number of Black Americans achieving admission to higher education has increased, the majority of these students attend institutions in which the campus population is predominantly White and where Blacks are experiencing significantly negative side effects associated with social isolation and alienation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Historically, there has been much discussion in the literature concerning the declining pool of urban minority students with the capacity

to successfully participate in post-secondary educational programs at predominantly White institutions (Jackson, 1992). Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) hypothesized, after an extensive review of this research, that attendance at predominantly White colleges does not enhance the educational attainment of Black students, and that the reason for this lack of educational attainment "is difficult to determine from the [previous research] evidence presented", (p. 382). These researchers appear to support the case made by Fleming (1984), Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman (1986), Green (1989), and others who concluded that the current conceptual framework has not been adequate in explaining the situational differences in the college behaviors associated with the presence of Black students at predominantly White institutions.

There is not a large body of research which effectively explains why some Black students on predominantly White campuses do manage to successfully adapt to the academic demands of their undergraduate life. "As it now stands, blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, and American Indians bear the entire burden of adapting to the majority culture on campus", (Green, 1989, p. viii). The general research consensus tends to suggest that successful Black students at predominantly White institutions

possessed unique interaction style behaviors that may be gender influenced (Steward, Jackson & Jackson, 1990). A review of this literature revealed that one aspect related to interaction style behavior suggested by many researchers was the concept of student assertiveness.

Procedure

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influences of gender and socioeconomic status on assertiveness for Black Freshmen and Juniors on the campuses of four predominantly White universities. This study is descriptive in nature and employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques to investigate gender differences in Black student assertiveness on predominantly White university campuses.

Quantitative data were collected from 560 Black Freshmen and Juniors attending four southeastern schools of higher education during the 1994 academic year. The quantitative aspect of this study examined the gender related differences in positive and negative assertiveness for Black students at predominantly White universities after controlling for school year and socioeconomic status. Assertiveness was measured by the *College Self Expression Scale* (CSES, Galassi, 1974). Qualitative data were collected from 21 key informants selected from the quantitative

respondents.

Analysis

A general linear model was used to quantitatively analyze the data with assertiveness as the dependent variable and with student gender, school year, and socioeconomic status as independent variables.

The qualitative aspect of this study employed a naturalistic inquiry design which relied on semi-structured personal telephone survey interviews of key Black student informants as the method of data collection and analysis. Qualitative data were collected using the Qualitative Interview Survey Questionnaire (QISQ). The qualitative aspect of this study attempted to identify unique beliefs, attitudes and campus experiences associated with the phenomenon of Black student assertiveness at predominantly White institutions of higher education. This is an area of inquiry which that research has identified as particularly problematic for researchers employing quantitative data collection techniques (Bangura, 1992). Comparison of the data from the assertiveness scale, in-depth personal interviews, and the results from other research literature allowed this study's findings to be triangulated across several sources.

Results

Quantitative

A total of 560 students (25%) completed and returned CSES surveys; from a total targeted population of 2,261 Black freshman and junior students attending four urban predominantly White post secondary educational institutions. This quantitative sample included 270 freshmen, 290 juniors, 221 males and 339 females. The respondents included students who ranged in age from 17 years to 39 years with a mean age of 20 years. The majority of the students (80%) rated their family's socio-economic status (SES) as middle income, whereas the remainder were more than two times as likely to report low income family status (13.%), as to report high income family status (5.5%).

Pearson correlations were calculated and the relationships between the variables are contained in Table 1. Among the three dependent variables, CSES positive subscale, CSES negative subscale, and CSES total

TABLE 1.

Pearson Correlations Between Gender and CSES Subscales

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender	_					
2. Sch Year	.09	_				
3. SES	-.02	-.06	_			
4. Positive CSES	-.00	.00	.08	_		
5. Negative CSES	.06	.04	.11	.47*	_	
6. Total CSES	.03	.03	.06	.82*	.89*	_

*p < .01

scores, all exhibited significant correlations with each other, but they produced no significant correlations with the gender, school year, socio-economic status variables. The two-and three-way interactions between the independent variables were examined but were not found to be significant. Outliers were examined but were not deleted.

The results from ANOVA examinations of the quantitative student data indicated that there were not statistically significant interactions or differences in the assertiveness of Black students attending the four Predominantly White Institutions involved in this study. The overall model (r squared = .03) accounted for only 3% of the variance in the model.

Gender, school year, and socioeconomic status were not found to have a statistically significant effect on assertiveness for Black students at these four predominantly White universities. However, whereas the results from this analysis indicated no statistically significant differences in the assertiveness of Black students at these institutions, there were several general trends in the qualitative data that may provide interesting possibilities for future qualitative research.

All students had higher mean scores for negative assertiveness (anger-expressing behaviors) than for positive assertiveness (friendly-

affectionate behaviors). Overall, negative student assertiveness (anger-expressing behaviors) tended to be much higher than positive student assertiveness (friendly-affectionate behaviors), and this trend held for all sub-categories of Black students surveyed at the four predominantly White postsecondary institutions included in this study.

The gender assertiveness patterns of Black student CSES mean scores at these institutions did not resemble those associated with traditional White students (Wilson & Gallois, 1985) and/or Black students at historically Black postsecondary institutions (Fleming, 1984). Black female students had higher observed total assertiveness mean scores than Black males, and this difference was particularly strong for negative type assertiveness behaviors. Black male students tended to score slightly higher in positive assertiveness than Black females, however, all students had higher mean scores for negative student assertiveness than for positive assertiveness at these institutions.

The research of Fleming (1984) and others reported that Black female students tended to be more assertive than Black males on predominantly White campuses. However, the fact that Black female students appeared to have higher levels of primarily negative

assertiveness (anger, opposition, and aggression) than positive assertiveness (friendly, affectionate and nonanxious) on predominantly White campuses had not been previously reported in the literature.

The variable school year (SCHYR) did not appear to have any statistically significant impact on the relationship between gender and assertiveness for Black students at these particular Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Education. However, juniors had higher total scores, in all categories, than freshmen which supports the relationship between age and assertiveness that had been previously identified in the literature by Furnham (1979).

The variable socioeconomic status (SES) may indeed be interrelated in some manner with gender as reported by Franks (1984), however, this effect appears to have resulted primarily from the scores of Black students in the high SES category. It appears that students who reported higher SES backgrounds tended to produce higher levels of assertiveness. High SES students had scores higher than any of the other SES categories on all the assertiveness scales, but the relatively small cell size for this category (n=31) decreases the power of statistical tests to detect meaningful subgroup effects in this data set. The pattern

of the results from this analysis tended to support the findings of other researchers which produced non-traditional gender differences in student assertiveness for Black students at predominantly White postsecondary institutions (Fleming, 1984, Sadberry-Wilson, Winfield & Royster, 1991 and Jackson, 1992).

Qualitative

Of the 22 selected key informants who had completed the CSES, 21 students consented to participate in the in-depth qualitative follow-up telephone interviews. The qualitative sample included 10 freshmen, 11 juniors, 11 males, and 10 females. One freshman female refused to be interviewed. The results from the qualitative interviews are summarized as follows:

1. The majority of Black students felt more comfortable with a passive assertiveness style at predominantly White institutions. When students were asked to identify their assertiveness style, the majority of the respondents described their personal campus assertiveness style as Passive/Submissive regardless of their gender. Passive freshmen, primarily explained their passiveness as: an adaptation to a new unfamiliar environment, waiting to find a niche,

not yet into the swing of things, trying to get a feel for what is expected, or maintaining a low profile. Passive juniors explained their passiveness as: being worried more about grades or just doing whatever it takes to graduate. Many Passive/Submissive freshmen expressed plans to be more assertive in the future as they became more familiar with their particular institutions, but none of the Passive junior respondents expressed similar plans. Assertive respondents noted that their behavior depended upon the situation and generally tended to wish that they could be more assertive while Aggressive respondents did not feel a need to compromise because they tended not to care what others thought about them.

2. Black students felt that there were specific gender differences associated with student assertiveness. These gender differences were non-traditional (females more assertive) for on-campus academic behaviors and traditional (males more assertive) for on-campus social behaviors.
3. The socioeconomic backgrounds of Black students at predominantly White institutions did not influence their campus academic assertive behaviors but did influence their campus social

assertiveness

4. Black students believed that their personal assertiveness style had affected their academic campus survival. The majority of the students who believed that their assertiveness style had a positive effect on their academic performance considered themselves to be academically assertive regardless of how they had defined their style in the earlier quantitative questions. Positive effect respondents believed that White university faculty tended to respect, gave more help to, and academically rewarded assertive Black students who: worked hard, were determined to make good grades, discussed material after class, were focused, and were willing to speak out aggressively in class. Negative effect students expressed the belief that White faculty were: intimidating, hard to talk to, or too disrespectful and students were afraid to ask questions in class that might make them appear to be dumb. These students were afraid that their grades would suffer if they were too assertive. One respondent felt that while his grades were okay, he could probably have done better academically if he had not been so outspoken.
5. The majority of Black students reported that they became more

passive at predominantly White institutions.

6. Most Black students felt the need to adapt their assertiveness styles to their campus environments.
7. The factor that most Black students reported as contributing to their survival at predominantly White institutions involved some form of peer group support, followed by a determination to succeed, parents/family support, and faculty support. The majority of respondents consistently mentioned peer group support as the most important factor associated with their success on their campuses. A key informant explained that campus survival was directly related to "Knowing other students who have taken certain professors or classes before and who could provide copies of old tests and/or class notes". Another respondent mentioned that "He must do his part because his peer group studied together and it was easier to get their academic help, if they believed that he had something to offer". This student was motivated to study harder because the academic support of his peer group was a benefit that he had to earn by his own contribution to the groups' success. The respondents were asked to list four major factors which had contributed to their

survival at this particular institution. The resulting percentages do not add up to 100% because some factors were listed more than once. This information is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Frequency Distribution of Respondent's Survival Factors.

Factor Category n = 21	Frequency	Percent
Peer Group Support	14	67%
Determination to Succeed	13	62%
Parents/Family	12	57%
Faculty Support	6	29%
Hard Work	5	24%
Adapting to Campus Environment	5	24%
Positive Attitude	5	24%
Academic Background	4	19%
Being Focused	4	19%
Belief in God	3	14%
Having Goals	3	14%
Past Experience	2	9%
Being a Minority	2	9%
Being a Fighter	1	5%
Total	21	

The data from both the quantitative questionnaires and the in-depth phone survey interviews were compared to research findings in the review of assertiveness literature. This method allowed for triangulation across several data sources in order to test for credibility (reliability) and auditability (validity) (Guba & Lincoln, 1991). A comparison and analysis of the findings from the key Black student informant survey interviews, the CSES instrument, and the results from other related research (found in the literature review) allows a naturalistic inquiry designed study to triangulate its findings across other sources in order to test issues of credibility and auditability (Guba & Lincoln, 1991). "The use of triangulation helps to demonstrate validity and open up new perspectives about the topic under investigation" (Borg & Gall, 1989, p. 397).

Comparison of the qualitative conclusions with the trends identified from the quantitative results revealed several conflicting findings. Qualitative data indicated that many students believed that gender influenced student assertiveness in a non-traditional (females more assertive) manner. Quantitative data indicated that the socio-economic status (SES) variable appeared to be more important in influencing Black student assertiveness than the gender variable. The qualitative method

identified a possible low SES influence on student social assertiveness but revealed no SES influence for campus academic assertiveness. Additionally, triangulation revealed that some of the students who had rated themselves as assertive or aggressive on the quantitative survey had identified themselves as passive or submissive during the qualitative survey. It appears that the students responded differently, to the question of personal assertiveness style, on a paper and pencil format than they did over the telephone, for reasons that are not readily apparent.

Discussion

The qualitative results obtained from the key Black student informants who participated in this study, provide some useful insights into the nature of Black student assertiveness at these four predominantly White institutions. The data support Bangura's 1992 conclusions that "survey approaches must be augmented with other methods in our efforts to advance knowledge, and thereby improve decision-making" (p. 15).

This study has revealed that the more traditional gender related assertiveness differences tend to be associated with on-campus social

behaviors, whereas non-traditional gender differences tend to be associated with on campus academic behaviors for Black students on the selected White campuses. These tendencies may help to explain why respondents who rated themselves as assertive or even aggressive in the quantitative surveys, later claimed to be passive or even submissive in the qualitative research. Black females expressed the need to behave in a more passive manner around Black males in order to be socially accepted by their peer group. Social interaction with the peer group is very important to most Black students on predominantly White campuses, and they modify their personal assertiveness styles in order to blend in with the majority of other Black students. In addition, this study identified school year differences in the behavior of the students who had identified their assertiveness style as passive. Passive freshmen appeared to be intimidated by the unfamiliarity of their new campus environment, and expressed the belief that they would become more assertive in the future. Passive juniors appeared to fear the possibility of not graduating and expressed no belief in their future assertiveness.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations that must be considered when

interpreting the findings of this study. First, some variation in the method of administering the CSES instrument was necessary due to the dispersal of the targeted students in the general college population. Initially, the survey plan involved administering the instrument in intact classrooms and 10% of the data was collected in this manner. However, it was obvious that this data collection method would not produce a large enough number of completed surveys within the scheduled research time table. As a result, it was necessary to employ supplemental sampling from a number of campus interviewing stations, which accounted for 90% of the data collected in this study.

Second, some of the students who rated themselves as assertive or aggressive on the quantitative survey later identified themselves as passive or submissive during the qualitative survey. The instrument used for the quantitative survey was a paper and pencil type inventory (CSES) which limits one's ability to control for the truthfulness of the survey's respondents. Although the responding students had no apparent interest in the outcome of this research, it appears that they responded differently to the question of assertiveness style on a paper and pencil survey format than they did on the telephone survey. The reason for this

apparent discrepancy is not clear. Research methods involving personal contact may be more intimidating to this population of students.

Finally, because only freshmen and juniors were surveyed, the results may not be generalizable to other college year populations. Furthermore, this study was conducted at four southern predominantly White institutions and as a result, there may be student behavioral characteristics that are unique to southern educational environments which may also limit the application of these results to Black students in other predominantly White campus environments.

Suggestions for Future Research

The results of the analyses suggest several promising new directions for future research. A limited amount of recent research in higher education has been directed towards minority students attending predominantly White institutions and most existing information dates back to the 1980's. There is a great need to further expand the existing body of knowledge in order to better understand the successful campus adaptation strategies of the increasing numbers of Black students who are currently attending predominantly White educational institutions.

The qualitative findings from this study indicate that positive

and/or negative peer group support effects are important motivating factors associated with the on-campus assertiveness behavior, social adaptation and academic survival of Black students currently attending predominantly White institutions. The qualitative data strongly support the conclusion that Black students may have to find some communal niche apart from the broader college campus environment in order to survive until graduation (Tinto, 1987). These findings have revealed the need to further investigate the academic and socio-economic influences of peer group effects on the campus adaptation and survival strategies employed by Black students on predominantly White campuses. Additional qualitative research is recommended to offer meaningful insights into the peer group influences on the assertiveness profiles of Black students at White institutions in relation to their socio-economic backgrounds.

A second promising area for future research would involve a more detailed investigation into why Black female students appear to express low levels of positive assertiveness (friendly-affectionate behaviors) at predominantly White institutions. It appears that these levels are primarily related to on campus social interactions and may be influenced

by student socio-economic background. A larger qualitative study using in-depth interviews combined with ethnographic methodologies should provide some interesting findings.

Also, the data suggest that low SES category Black students may be the ones least likely to express anger-expressing or aggressive type behaviors on Predominantly White campuses, while the high SES category students are probably the most likely to express anger or aggressive behaviors. This indicates a possible role of the SES variables in influencing the type of assertiveness (positive or negative) behaviors expressed by Black students at White universities that requires additional investigation. However, since all SES categories tended to produce higher means for negative assertiveness than for positive assertiveness, it appears that all Black students on predominantly White campuses may exhibit less friendly/affectionate type behavior as a group than traditional students or Black students at historically Black campuses. Another fertile area for future research might involve an investigation of the relationship between anger-expressing behavior and school satisfaction for Black students at predominantly White postsecondary institutions. One wonders, whether or not the higher levels of negative Black student assertiveness found in

this study are unique to White institutions or are common at other institutions, and if so, then why? Perhaps a qualitative type investigation into the possible relationships between the expression of negative assertiveness and Black student satisfaction on historically Black and predominantly White campuses might produce the knowledge necessary to answer these questions. Finally, it is possible that Black students who produce very high negative assertiveness scores are probably more likely to drop-out or transfer and additional research in this area could formalize new predictive models that will expand the current conceptual framework for understanding the possible influences of negative Black student assertiveness on predominantly White campus retention.

Conclusions

The qualitative results from this study support the findings of earlier research which suggested a non-traditional gender difference in the assertiveness of Black students at Predominantly White Postsecondary Institutions of Higher Education. Fleming (1984) and others theorized that the traditional assertiveness pattern with males usually being more assertive than females would be reversed for Black students at predominantly White postsecondary institutions. The results from the

present study also, provide further support for the previous position of Kirschner & Galassi (1982) "that assertion is influenced by both personal and situational factors" (p. 360), by qualitatively identifying several new personal and situational variables for Black students that may override the usual gender influences associated with traditional college student assertiveness. In addition, this study expands the more recent findings (Chan, 1993) on the multidimensional nature of assertiveness from earlier studies on populations of Hong Kong Chinese college students in non-Chinese settings. There was no statistically significant gender difference in the assertiveness of Black students at these Predominantly White Institutions. However, whereas the results from this quantitative analysis indicated no significant gender difference in the assertiveness of Black students at these institutions, there were several general trends in the qualitative data that may provide interesting possibilities for future qualitative research.

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